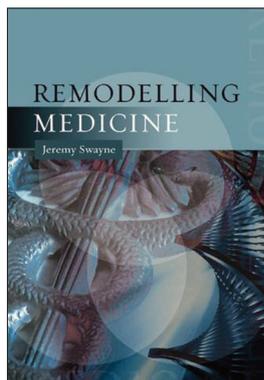


Out of Hours Books

REMODELLING MEDICINE JEREMY SWAYNE

Saltire Books, 2012
HB, 507pp, £39.99, 978-1908127006



Do you ever feel vaguely uncomfortable about the dominance of biomedicine in our health system? Do you have a creeping anxiety about the ways in which we are incentivised to focus on diseases rather than people and are you concerned that biomedicine is creating public expectations and economic demands that are undeliverable? I suspect that many of us have these concerns, although we rarely surface them and even less frequently feel able to do anything about them. Biomedicine is powerful and persuasive, so much so that not only doctors but also many patients, policy makers, and system leaders act as if it is the only model on which to base health care.

If you share these nagging concerns then *Remodelling Medicine* is for you. And if you don't then perhaps it is even more important that you read the book. The author, Jeremy Swayne, trained as a basic scientist and has worked as a GP, a teacher, a homoeopathist, and a church minister — a good pedigree to challenge medicine from both within and without. In an informative, passionate, and provocative way, Swayne takes us on his personal and professional journey, his battles with values, ideas, and paradigms. It is an aspirational book and a brave one.

Swayne describes how the preoccupation with the scientific method which underpins the practice of biomedicine has led to what he calls 'a state of paradigm paralysis'. He talks much about the hubris of biomedically-oriented doctors and the need to exhibit greater humility if we are to be more effective in helping our patients. He

suggests that we will only rediscover the healing vocation of medicine, we will only be successful in integrating science with caring, if we re-engage with other ways of thinking and knowing. He draws heavily on his expertise in the field of complementary and alternative medicine to illustrate what these other ways of acquiring knowledge could look like.

The book has a meandering style. The prose is sometimes repetitive, and frequent cross-referencing within the text can be distracting. But in many ways these criticisms reflect the joy of the book; the narrative mirrors Swayne's journey and a rigorous edit may remove the soul of the story.

The author seems to me to adopt a rather narrow and stereotypical view of what science is about. He seems to conflate the design and intent of the scientific method, as a rigorous and systematic way of generating knowledge, with its application in practice. The latter, like all practice, is often imperfect and occasionally flawed. He confuses scepticism, one of the basic tenets of the scientific method, with dogmatism. Well-trained scientists reject ideology, work with ambiguity, and are sensitive to the strengths and flaws of the epistemologies underpinning their methods. Their challenges are not that different from those of grounded clinical practitioners.

But the more significant problem for me with *Remodelling Medicine* is that it isn't clear who the book is meant to influence. If it is a manifesto, and it reads like one, then presumably the author has political intent. Is he trying to bolster the views of those who are already persuaded by the arguments, persuade those who are receptive to thinking differently, or convert the sceptics?

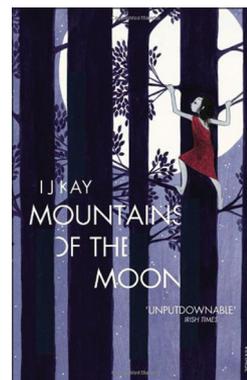
The latter is where a difference could really be made but the use of phrases like 'psychic energy' and 'doctrine abuse' are unlikely to engage those who hold power in the current system, the people who need to be persuaded if we are to challenge the dominance of biomedicine. The book is highly stimulating but I am not confident that it will change the world.

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MOUNTAINS OF THE MOON IJ KAY

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Mountains of the Moon is the debut novel of IJ Kay and is a wonderful survivor's story. As a means to understanding the life not lived — surely a test of great writing — I would put this novel up there with James Kelman's *How Late it Was, How Late*. That novel caused enormous upset among the UK's literary 'elite' when it won the Man Booker Prize in 1994. 'Frankly, its crap', moaned Julia Neuberger as she resigned from the panel when Kelman won, presumably protesting that stark insights into the lives of this country's provincial underclass are not suitable reading matter for North London's book clubs. Well, in *Mountains of the Moon*, IJ Kay has captured what it is to be a young woman dragged up by hopeless parents and well-meaning social services in modern Britain. She has managed it imaginatively, lyrically, and a good bit less profanely than her great predecessor.

IJ Kay is, like her novel, something of an enigma, choosing to live and write on a canal boat navigating the waterways of England. The narrative of her surprising and exhilarating debut novel certainly does not flow in a stately fashion like one of the author's beloved English waterways. Indeed reading it was more akin to a ramble through Hampton Court maze; the first-person narrative bounding back and forth through the present and past life of our variously (six at my count) named heroine. This is not an easy book to read. Ultimately, however, piecing the story together from the various alleys down which we have been

led by Kay's beguiling and poetic prose, we realise as we finish that we have read the searing, troubling, and uplifting story of Catherine, a survivor.

An initially harrowing tale is here: a disturbed and disturbing childhood; adolescence and young adulthood blighted by mental illness, neglect, violence, institutionalisation, and imprisonment. With the protagonist seemingly victim and transgressor at various stages of the action, some passages are genuinely shocking. A cast of colourful, well-drawn characters — many seedy and unpleasant, a few sympathetic and positively influential — populate this novel's world, helpfully arrayed in a cast list near the title page. In fact, the author hints at the comedy and tragedy of this disordered and chaotic life by explicitly structuring her novel as a theatrical production, complete with overture, acts, and finale. The language of the first person narrative is extremely inventive, the narrator's childish mode of expression subsequently developing into knowing adult slang. I say that the novel is something of an enigma, in that sorting a frequently brutal reality from flights of exquisite fantasy can be confusing, not least during the heroine's period as an escapee from social work care, and during her triumphant African adventure, for which the novel is titled. I guess Kay has employed this device to skilfully capture Catherine's unquiet mind as she battles to survive.

As we start, Catherine (the first of her six names during the novel) has been newly released from prison having served a sentence for the shooting of Eton Boy. This is an act whose exposition, complication, and climax are never explicitly narrated and which remains, therefore, tantalisingly obscure as we lay this book aside. As she contemplates her grimy flat and truly dreadful job in the biscuit factory and reflects on her life up to this point, her disordered reminiscences reveal the various characters and influences that have acted together to bring her here. We learn of a deeply troubled childhood, frequently missing school to be with a chaotic, self-obsessed, and theatrically irresponsible Mother, while occasionally witnessing the violent visitations of her brutish semi-present father, Bryce. Early on, there is loss when well-loved half brother Pip moves to Wales. This leads to her touchingly misguided efforts at mothering baby Grady. Now 27, he wishes no contact with his sister. A kindly grandad enthuses her fertile young mind with presents of books and encouragement to fantasise about

adventures as a Masai warrior, one of only a few positive influences on her life. A period of childhood institutionalisation follows with an apparent escape, whether partly figurative or entirely literal is not clear, to live among the Velvit Gentlemen and other patients of a rambling psychiatric hospital.

The events leading up to Catherine's incarceration see her, in her 20s, working in a casino in the Southwest among such deadbeats as the comical and truly dreadful Welsh Slapper and Heath 'the Joker', but finding love with Pete 'the Oak Tree' Eden. A chain of events set in motion by the proximity of these ill-chosen acquaintances leads to Catherine's substantial prison sentence, but she never quite tells us why. On release, a successful compensation claim and the subletting of her flat to the kindly Danny Fish allow her to act on her childhood fantasies and depart on a brief African Odyssey. This is excitingly described: Uganda, for example, and a beautiful dawn in the *Mountains of the Moon*, meeting Robertson, a free and offbeat character. Subsequent journeying leads to a violent contretemps with a richly deserving errant driver at the Tanzania/Malawi border, and then a visit to her erstwhile shooting victim in South Africa. Returned home, the novel finishes with her bounding through a Portsmouth-bound train in search of her old coat, a symbol of her better self.

The action described above is teased out by careful reading of the novels 350 pages, and must be pieced together by an alert and motivated reader. I repeat, this is not an easy book to read. But it is ultimately a rewarding one. Like many readers of this Journal, I was brought up in a comfortable middle-class household by loving, responsible parents. Yet, daily in my work as a GP I'm faced with patients sharing much in common with this book's heroine, and her life less ordinary. I have read few contemporary books that capture so effectively the accidents and choices that conspire to bring a person to their point of release from prison. The chaos and confusion engendered in reading this book, mirroring that in Catherine's mind as we meet her now, are worth reflecting on as we encounter young people in our surgeries with complex health and social needs. So too, is the mental and physical toughness that such a childhood creates in its survivors, an approach to life which becomes innate but can appear extreme, violent, and unacceptable to those more fortunate. There is, however, comedy and joy in most lives, another aspect of existence

captured well in the pages of this novel. We can laugh uproariously as Catherine and the Slapper manoeuvre an incontinent horse from a piss-soaked bungalow. We can secretly envy the way she deals with bullying co-workers in the biscuit factory. We can admire her wife in making her way to and through Africa, even her ability to defend herself using extreme violence.

So read this novel, it's excellent. You'll really like Catherine; you may not fully understand her, but you'll end with some idea of why she is who she is.

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The Authors' Club Best First Novel Award has been won jointly by Ros Barber for *The Marlowe Papers* and IJ Kay for *Mountains of the Moon*. The prize was adjudicated by the novelist Salley Vickers, who announced the winners and presented two cheques for £1250 each at a ceremony at the National Liberal Club in London on Monday 3 June 2013. <http://dolmanprize.wordpress.com/best-first-novel-award/>

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